DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 942 UD 018 167

AUTHOR Prichard, Karen Kidd
TITLE Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences in Urban Schools.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 24p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; Communication Problems; *Communication Skills; *Counseling; Counseling Effectiveness; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Teacher Conferences; Simulation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Education; *Training Techniques; Workshops

ABSTRACT

A workshop type method of training teachers in the use of counseling techniques for facilitating parent teacher conferences is described. It is based on the Carkhuff model of attending, responding, initiating, and communicating. At each of the four stages, the leader first discusses its purpose and the specific behaviors to be encompassed in the exercise. He then demonstrates the behaviors. Finally, the participants are divided into triads of "parent", "teacher", and "observer" to practice the behaviors in simulation exercises. Attending behaviors seek to assure parents that they are important enough to deserve the teacher's full attention. In the responding stage of the workshop, teachers' attention is directed to the feelings underlying parental statements. There are two possible types of responses to these statements: those which facilitate communication (interchangeable); and those which make parents feel defensive (subtractive). At the initiating stage of the workshop, the teachers attempt to relate the common themes of the conference. At the communicating stage, teacher and parent work together to solve specific problems. All the training materials used in the workshop are included. (Author/HC)

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EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES IN URBAN SCHOOLS

Karen Kidd Prichard
Wichita State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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UD018167

Abstract

By learning counseling techniques aimed at facilitating the affective domain of parent conferences, teachers can greatly enhance their ability to both communicate about and involve parents in the child's educational process. Presenting the four-stage Carkhuff model of Attending, Responding, Initiating and Communicating in a workshop-type format has proven to be a most effective way of training urban teachers in those counseling techniques which facilitate parent conferences. This paper focuses on the actual delivery of the model and includes all training materials which the author has used in the workshop.

EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES IN URBAN SCHOOLS[1]

Karen Kidd Prichard
Wichita State University

Parent-teacher conferencing whether a scheduled, school-wide activity or one initiated by a teacher to communicate a particular concern regarding a student, is a fact of life for most urban teachers. A search of the literature, however, reveals few articles available dealing with conferencing, and certainly none which provide urban classroom teachers with the kinds of specific counseling techniques which they could use to facilitate parent conferences.

The rationale for teachers utilizing counseling techniques is best understood in light of the reasons most conferences are held. Alexander (Note 1) found most teacher-initiated conferences are to discuss the child's behavior; followed by reporting the student's academic status (progress). Based on their own school experiences, many urban parents view the school as a place of frustration and failure. It is not surprising, therefore, to find parents arriving for conferences already feeling defensive. Furthermore, if either the student's behavior or academic progress is not viewed as acceptable by the parents, they may feel the need to refute the teacher's judgment; or since the child's success of failure is often internalized as parental success or failure, the parent may view negative reports or

comments about the child as a threat to his/her worth or adequacy.

Defensiveness obviously interfers with communication and problem solving since as Coleman (1964) points out, "they (defense mechanisms) involve a high degree of self-deception and reality distortion" (p. 96). Because one aspect of counseling techniques is to minimize defensiveness and facilitate communication, it seems logical to assume that if urban teachers use these techniques, better parent-teacher communication is likely to occur which in turn will lead to movement toward problem solution. Based on the positive responses to a questionnaire given to urban teachers who have used these techniques in actual parent conferences, this assumption seems justified.

After trying several didactic approaches, the best method of teaching teachers these counseling skills appears to be in a workshop-type format. In this regard the work of Davis (1975) proved to be most helpful in providing a training model which could be modified for use with teachers. It is the author's experience that this workshop is best conducted in a six-hour day with three hours in the morning, a lunch break and then three hours in the afternoon; condensing it into a shorter time frame does not allow the participants time to role play the exercises nor to acquire any of the counseling skills even at a minimal level.

The initial workshop activity is to divide the participants into groups of five or six with instructions to list the three most difficult aspects of parent conferencing on the sheets of newsprint which have been provided. These sheets are then displayed so that all of the groups can share their results. After discussing these aspects, it becomes evident to the participants that neraly all of them view a conference where the focus is a student's problem (misbehavior, incomplete work, no homework and so on) as the most difficult. Following this activity, teachers are encouraged to discuss ways in which they have dealt with problem-oriented conferences. From these examples, teachers are lead into expressing their feelings during such types of conferences and imagining what the parents may have been feeling. As this disucssion progresses, the teachers begin to see how defensive feelings interferred with communication and to acknowledge that perhaps ways of dealing with the affective (feeling) domain in conferences would facilitate problem solution. That is, teachers begin to see that if either they or the parents are feeling defensive then angry behavior is generally what occurs, and if both parties are feeling angry, there can be little hope of talking about the child's problem in a rational manner.

At this point, the workshop leader discusses why counseling techniques can be helpful in problem-oriented conferences

and briefly overviews the four-stage Carkhuff (1973) model of Attending, Responding, Initiating and Communicating. The Affective Parent-Teacher Conferencing Diagram (Figure 1) graphs the steps in the counseling strategy and provides a visual overview of how the counseling skills flow from initial Attending behaviors through devising a plan of action. Additionally, the diagram helps to illustrate that each of the stages involves a decision. For instance, the teacher may choose to respond to a parent statement, or to focus on other things or make an evaluation of the parent's statement. If the teacher chooses the latter two alternatives, then the flow of counseling skills ceases.

For each stage of the Carkhuff model, the workshop leader utilizes the "tell-show-do" design. First the leader discusses or "tells" the purpose of the stage and what specific behaviors are to be encompassed in the exercise; next she/he demonstrates or "shows" the behaviors; and finally the participants practice or "do" the behaviors in simulated role-play. Throughout the simulation exercises, the participants are divided into triads for the activities. For each of the four exercises, one triad member role-plays the parent, a second the teacher and the third observes the simulation. Through the use of the Behavior Rating Sheet (Appendix 1) each of the members rates the "teacher's" behavior and at the end of the simulation provides feedback to the teacher.

The first exercise focuses on Attending Behaviors which seek to assure the parents that they are important enough to warrant the teacher's full attention. In addition to discussing Attending Behaviors, teachers are provided with a written explanation (Appendix 2) of this dimension.

At the next stage, Responding, teachers practice verbalizing the cognitive (content) and affective (feeling) aspects of parent statements. By observing actual parent conferences, one can easily see that teachers generally react only to what the parent is saying without taking into consideration the feelings underlying parental statements. As indicated by Appendix 3, the focus of activity is to call teachers' attention to the two types of responses (Interchangeable and Subtractive) and to provide a model ("You feel_____ because _____.") for Interchangeable responses. Another way for a teacher to respond is by asking a question. As Appendix 3 indicates some types of questions seem to facilitate communication while others may make the parent feel defensive. Appendix 4 is an example of a worksheet which is used to help teachers differentiate between Interchangeable and Subtractive responses. Questions 3 and 4 generally generate the most discussion since the first responses are often viewed as Interchangeable since they contain the words "you feel." Experience indicates that it is difficult for teachers to

understand that there is no "feeling word" (happy, sad, angry) associated with either response; i.e., the feeling associated with "its a hard decision" may be frustration, anger, helplesness or so forth. As suggested by Carkhuff, Pierce and Cannon (1977, p. 86) there are also different levels of feeling. For example if parents have been voicing statements indicating they are furious, they will feel misunderstood if the teacher's response is, "You seem a little upset." Participants are encouraged to generate additional words which would fit into the different levels. Frequently at this point teachers begin to discuss the cultural and/or socio-economic aspects of "feeling words" and to cognize that some words which might be considered profanity in one culture may be perfectly acceptable in another. Such discussions often generate whole new lists of feeling words which seem more reflective of cultural differences than those suggested by Carkhuff et al. Informal discussions with urban teachers who have participated in the conferencing workshops indicate that when they utilize "street language" rather than linguistically formal communication, parents seem to respond in a more positive manner. As the participants are practicing Responding in triads, the person role-playing the teacher is encouraged to utilize both Interchangeable and Subtractive responses so that the triad member who is role-playing the parent can share with

the other triad members the differences in feelings which the two types of responses elicited. Most participants are surprised to find that there is a difference and that they feel "most listened to" when an Interchangeable response is used. Another frequently heard comment is, "I didn't realize I asked so many 'why' questions." or "It is hard to know how to answer when someone asks you why; I felt as though I had to justify myself." Using these shared perceptions, the workshop leader is able to show teachers how they sometimes inadvertently make parents react angrily or defensively by asking why or by missing the point of what parents are expressing both cognitively and affectively.

While the behaviors associated with the first two stages (Attending and Responding) can be acquired with brief practice activities, Initiating and Communicating can only be introduced during the course of a one-day workshop.

As Appendix 5 indicates, at the Initiating stage, the teacher attempts to relate common themes of the conference. This is done for two reasons; first to check out whether or not the teacher has accurately perceived what the parent has been saying and feeling and secondly to reconcile differences in parents' verbalizations and behavior and/or seemingly contradictory statements. Since

the whole rationale for utilizing counseling skills is to help alleviate parents' defensiveness, the attitude of the teacher needs to convey a concern for his or her accuracy of perception rather than one of criticizing parents for inconsistencies. For example a teacher might say, "After I explained what Ken needs to do to bring up his English grades, I asked if you had any questions. You said, 'no,' but you had a rather puzzled look on your face. Is there something that isn't quite clear?" This type of statement helps teachers validate the accuracy of a perception ("You looked puzzled.") and allows the parents to ask questions. On the other hand, if a teacher says, "Why didn't you ask questions after I explained Ken's English problems?" the parents are forced to try to rationalize their stupidity in not asking questions.

The final stage of the Carkhuff model is Communicating (Appendix 6). At this stage, the teacher and parents explore ways of solving the problem in order to arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution. Both parents and teacher try to generate as many alternatives as possible and to evaluate these alternatives as to possible outcomes. If for example the student is having difficulty in math, alternatives might include the purchase of a hand-held calculator, the feasability of tutoring, more structure from the parents in terms of required homework, alternative teaching strategies and so on. Teachers who have

utilized these skills after their in-service training report that they have found it helpful to indicate to the parents what they (teachers) can do in the classroom and to ask parents to cooperate by helping the student at home. One teacher described this as an "I will if you will" strategy. In other words, the teacher might say, "I will spend five minutes a day helping Ken with his math if you will see that he does one practice paper each evening." This kind of "bargaining" helps to clearly delineate both responsibility and the cooperative effort necessary to remediate the problem.

As was indicated previously, Initiating and Communicating are skills that cannot be fully mastered in a one-day workshop. Based on teacher response, the best way to introduce these skills is to videotape a simulated parent conference and then have the workshop participants rate the "teacher" using the Initiating and Communicating behaviors indicated in Appendix 1.

In order to help teacher integrate these skills, it has proven adviseable to schedule at least two, half-day sessions after teachers have been involved in parent conferences. During these follow-up sessions, the skills are reviewed through role play exercises and specific problems and/or questions encountered during the actual conferences with parents are discussed.

It seems obvious that not all teachers would be comfortable in interacting with parents in the manner suggested by this model, nor will utilizing minimal counseling skills ensure productive parent conferences; however, a majority of the 400 urban teachers who have participated in the conferencing workshops have indicated that they feel more comfortable in their ability to deal with problem-oriented parent conferences.

Reference Notes

1. Alexander, R. The role of the resource teacher in parent-teacher conferencing. Paper presented at the Forty-Fifth Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children, Chicago, March 1976.

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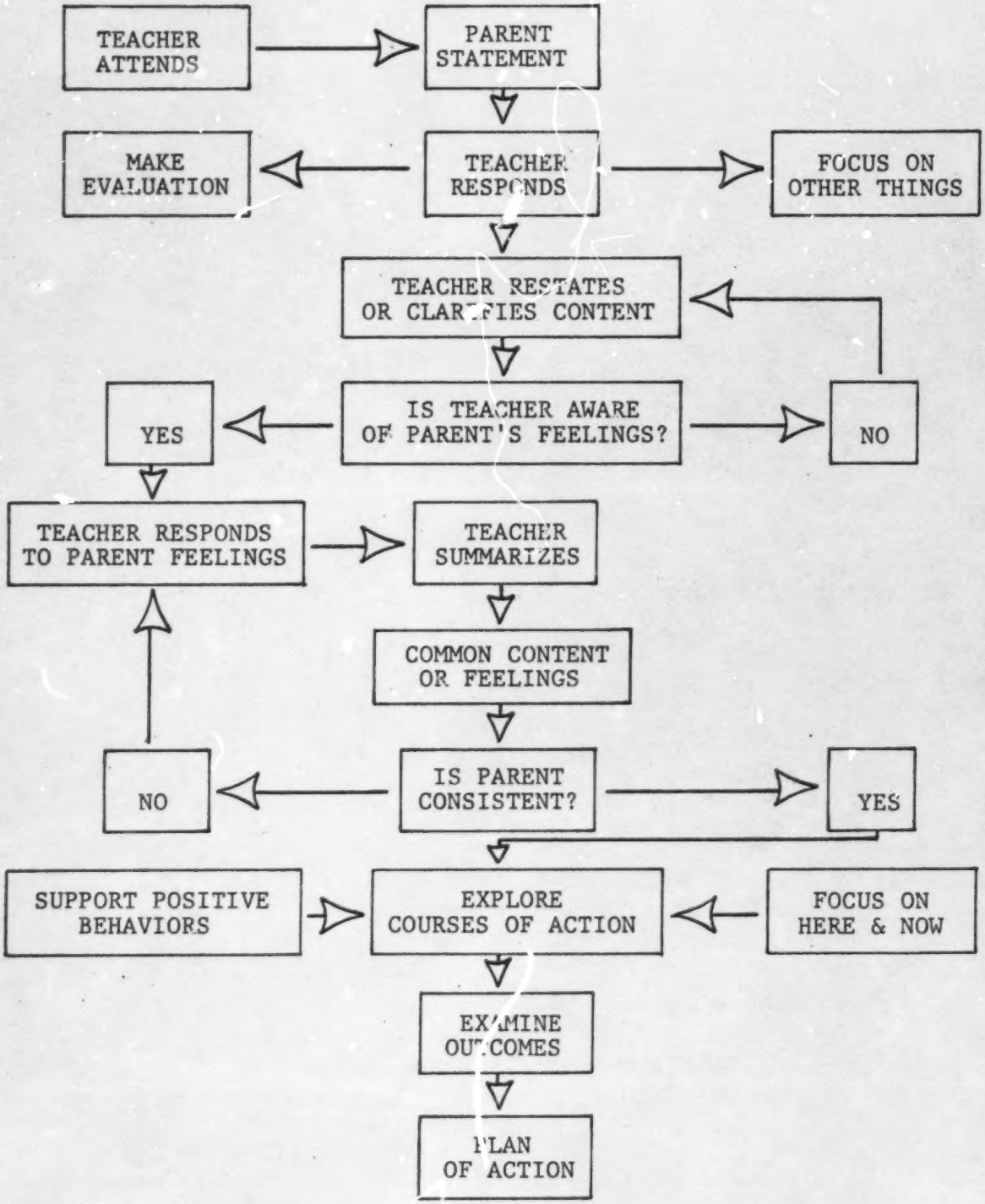
Footnotes

1. This paper is an expanded version of a paper entitled Counseling skills which facilitate urban parent-teacher conferences presented at the Third Annual National Conference on Urban Education, Norfolk, VA, December 1977.

Figure Caption

Figure 1: Affective Parent-Teacher Conferencing Diagram


TEACHER ATTENDS
PARENT STATEMENT
MAKE EVALUATION
TEACHER RESPONDS
FOCUS ON OTHER THINGS
TEACHER RESTATES OR CLARIFIES CONTENT
YES
IS TEACHER AWARE OF PARENT'S FEELINGS?
NO
TEACHER RESPONDS TO PARENT FEELINGS
TEACHER SUMMARIZES
COMMON CONTENT OR FEELINGS
NO
IS PARENT CONSISTENT?
YES
SUPPORT POSITIVE BEHAVIORS
EXPLORE COURSES OF ACTION
FOCUS ON HERE & NOW
EXAMINE OUTCOMES
PLAN OF ACTION

Appendix 1

SIMULATION RATING SHEET

All of the behaviors below will be rated using the following scale:

1. behavior occurs little or none of the time.
2. behavior occurs some of the time.
3. behavior occurs most or all of the time.

ATTENDING:

_____Teacher positions parents away from distractions.

_____Teacher sits comfortably, leaning slightly toward parents.

_____Teacher faces parents squarely.

_____Teacher maintains eye contact.

RESPONDING:

_____Teacher resrates content of parents' statement.

_____Teacher tentatively labels the feeling of the parents.

_____Teacher does not judge or label parents.

_____Teacher focuses on parents rather than on other things or people.

INITIATING:

_____Teacher summarizes content of several parent statements.

_____Teacher summarizes feeling of statements.

_____Teacher confronts parents with differences.

COMMUNICATING:

_____Teacher and parents identify different courses of action.

_____Consequences or outcomes of actions are mutually explored.

_____Teacher and parent agree on plan of action.

_____Teacher relates parent feelings about conference.

Appendix 2

ATTENDING

The purpose of attending behaviors is to let parent(s) know that he/she is the focus of your attention; that you are really interested in what is going on. Attending is done at both the non-verbal (body language) and verbal (minimal encourage) levels.

Attending Behaviors:

Non-verbal (body language)

1. Locate your body to screen parent(s) from distracting sights and sound.
2. Face the parent(s) squarely with head and body.
3. Lean slightly toward the parent(s) but maintain a relaxed position; try several body postures to see which one is most comfortable for you.
4. Maintain eye contact--but don't stare.
5. Head nodding--often this is an almost unconscious action when you're listening intently; it doesn't necessarily indicate agreement with what is being said, but indicates that you are following the speaker and wish them to continue.

Verbal (minimal encourage: brief utterances that show parents that you have "tuned in" to them.)

1. "Oh?" "So?" "Then?" "And?"
2. The repetition of one or two key words.
3. "Tell me more."
4. Simple restatement of the exact same words of the parents' last statement.
5. "UMM-hummmmm." "Uh-huh."
6. S-I-L-E-N-C-E you need to give the parent(s) time to respond; time to think. (This is an especially hard technique for teachers since in front of a classroom, continued discussion is very important; but in a parent-teacher conference, silence can be one of the most important techniques to practice.)

RESPONDING

The purpose of responding is to give back to the parent(s) the gist of what has been said. This is done for two reasons: (1) to be sure that you accurately heard what was said; and (2) to be sure that the parent(s) is clear about what he/she said. There are basically two typws of responses: Interchangeable and Subtractive. An interchangeable response tentatively labels the emotion and content of what a parent has said. What the talker is saying is the content portion portion of the message. How the talker gives the message (speed or vocal tone, facial expressions) as well as feeling words which the talker uses communicates how he/she is feeling. Subtractive response shifts the focus to things or people external to the discussion or such a response imposes the teacher's value system through judgment or criticism. One way to practice making interchangeable responses is to use the model "You feel (some feeling word like happy, sad) because (the reason the parent has stated or content)."

Another way of responding is to use questions. There are also two types of questions: open-ended and closed-ended. An open-ended question generally leads to a willingness to respond; a close-ended question shuts down communication. Probably the most often heard closed-ended question is "Have you stopped beating your wife?" If he says "No," he is in effect saying he did it in the past; if he says, "Yes," he is doing it both then and now. This type of question generally puts someone else in the "one-down" defensive position. On the other hand, an open-ended question leads to further communication and doesn't cause the parent to feel defensive.

Here are a few examples of parent statements demonstrating the difference between a closed- and open-ended quesiton:

Parent: So I'm wondering just what to do; I'm afraid I just don't know the answer; I seem to bungle everything.
Open: Could you tell me some more about "bungling everything?"
Closed: Why do you feel that way?

Parent: How come schools don't make kids learn anything?
Open: What kinds of things do you want them to learn?
Closed: Why on earth would you think that?

As a rule of thumb, questions that begin with "could," "What," or "how" tend to be more open-ended; often a "why" question is hard to answer and puts the parent on the defensive.

Appendix 4

RESPONDING BEHAVIOR EXERCISE

The following are four hypothetical parent statements. Following each statement are two teacher responses. Please indicate whether each response is Interchangeable (I) or Subtractive (S).

1. Parent: I'm never sure I've helped Gary since I work and have so little time at home.

   Teacher: I think quality of time is more important than quantity. (S)

   Teacher: The time pressure makes you feel doubtful about how effective you are as a parent. (I)

2. Parent: I'm terribly concerned about Jane's trouble in math. I don't know how to help.

   Teacher: Why don't you buy her a calculator? (S)

   Teacher: Jane's math problems are upsetting to you. (I)

3. Parent: I don't know if I should keep her in this school or check into private schools; she may even need to see a psychologist.

   Teacher: You feel its a hard decision. (S)

   Teacher: You're confused about which alternative is best. (I)

4. Parent: You haven't done anything for my Fred this year. Why, last year he just did so well in school. You just don't like him, that's his only problem.

   Teacher: You feel as though I haven't done enough. (S)

   Teacher: You think I don't like Fred and that makes you upset. (I)

Appendix 5

INITIATING

The purpose of initiating behavior is to draw together the common themes (both content and feeling) of the entire conference; to condense, recapitulate and crystalize what has been said. Like all human beings, we bring with us as listeners our own value system, experience and knowledge. Since all of these things can influence (distort) what we hear and see, we may be inaccurate in our perception of another's communication. By using summarization, we can check out our perceptions with parents to see how accurate we are in what we've seen or heard. Another purpose of initiating behavior is to help the parent recognize differences in what they have been saying. This kind of confronting is not done judgmentally or critically. The attitude is not one of "Ah, Ha! I caught you saying one thing one time and something else later;" rather it is one of simply pointing out the discrepancies in the communication so that the parent is aware of them. When summarization is accurate, it can help move the conference from discussion to action and problem solving.

Appendix 6

COMMUNICATING

The purpose of communicating behaviors is to explore alternative ways of solving the problem. As the teacher, you probably already have a plan in mind or a set of alternatives. However, it is often helpful to "brainstorm" with the parent(s) for they bring with them a broader range of experiences with the student. Thus it is often beneficial for the teacher and parent(s) to explore different courses of action and evaluate the possible outcomes of each alternative so that a mutually satisfactory solution can be reached. Since the parent(s) have been treated as human beings capable of making decisions and since they have had a chance to make input into the final solution, they are much more likely to help see that the plan or course of action is implemented in the home.